COUNCIL COMMITTEE REPORT
OPEN SPACE, ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY COMMITTEE

Date: September 23 2015

Agenda Item #: 3

Agenda Item: Public accessibility to healthy food options in each City district.

Vote No vote taken.

Sponsors/Department: CM Garza; Office of Sustainability

Summary of Discussion
Lucia Athens briefly described the definition of sustainability as it pertains to the City of Austin and how departments are working together to address the need for sustainable food sources in the city. Edwin Marty then made a presentation on food access in Austin. Marty explained the community impacts of limited food access, barriers to eating healthy food, and how to map food access in Austin. Additionally, Marty presented district data on the rates of food assistance, locations of gardens and farms, locations of retail outlets, and the projected population growth. Marty also discussed efforts towards food planning and production throughout the community while working with other departments to broaden the food plans.

Following the presentation, committee members posed the following questions about accessibility to healthy food in the City:

- *Parks and Recreation Board Chair Rivera asked how the City plans to increase recovered food donations to emergency shelters.*

Mr. Marty explained that there is a range of strategies that the City is looking into. The first and foremost is to support the existing organizations that are already doing that work. Keep Austin Fed is a non-profit organization working on 100% volunteer activity to move 30,000 pounds of produce each month from retail outlets to emergency feeding shelters. Mr. Marty believes that the City of Austin could be involved with that on a greater scale. In addition, staff is looking at the way the City regulates the food manufacturing processing and retail food safety issues to ensure that the City is doing everything it can to make it easy for food retail locations to donate food; the City's Health and Human Services Department does a great job of that. Marty further explained that the City should examine every strategy needed to get food to emergency feeding shelters. Overall, there are opportunities that can be looked at in the nonprofit sector, through examining the City's regulatory process, and also supporting the tech industry. For example, Mr. Marty explained that he met with individuals developing an Uber-like app to help connect food retail locations with emergency feeding shelter locations through the use of local transportation.

Ms. Athens further added that the City must meet a lot of code requirements to protect public health if it's going to be doing food donations. Athens noted that there are a lot of organizations that want to donate food but the City primarily implements requirements that are not very user-friendly; the code is focused more on telling people what not to do rather than explaining what they can do to help. Staff has been working towards completely revamping those materials to make them more user-friendly in terms of the language. This is an example of how there are simple things the City can do to try to get the information out to people who want to donate food but don't really know how to do it.

- *Vice Chair Garza asked staff to further explain the S.N.A.P program and about a City FTE to support the outreach efforts.*

Mr. Marty explained that S.N.A.P, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, is best known as the former food stamp program. A significant percentage of the city's community is eligible to receive S.N.A.P. benefits based on income, but a significant percentage of the community does not realize they are eligible. This lack of participation is most likely attributed to certain barriers such as cultural and language. The Food Bank has a staff person that is working on outreach activities to specific targeted communities to ensure that those communities do know about their S.N.A.P. eligibility.

Mr. Marty explained that the City funding went to the Food Bank to pay for their staff person. Mr. Marty explained that the staff member at the Food Bank was hired about six months ago and he does not think there has been an evaluation of the outcome at this point but the City is looking at ways to track the results of these targeted communities. The City's Sustainable Food Policy Board is interested in ensuring that the City is able to track that information. Although, the issue is complex, the City is certain that any type of tracking method would be a good use of resources especially since S.N.A.P. is a federally funded program.

- *CM Garza asked if people could use their S.N.A.P. benefits with the Double Dollar program and if the City funds it.*

Mr. Marty shared that individuals must be S.N.A.P eligible to use the Double Dollar program. The City is funding the Double Dollar program through the Sustainable Food Center. Up until 2014, the Sustainable Food Center used City funding to create the Double Dollar program at three to four of their farmers markets. Due to the increased allocation from the City, the Sustainable Food Center is now training other farmers markets around the region, as well as farms, to be able to utilize the Double Dollar program. Staff is hoping to see an increase in the use of the Double Dollar program over the next year including all of the local eighteen farmers markets, as well as other farm stands and farmers in the region.

- *CM Garza asked if staff is researching innovative ways to get grocery stores to food deserts, and if not, is that something that could be addressed in the budget next year.*

Mr. Marty added that the fact that the 175 sq. miles of Del Valle does not have a grocery store was somewhat stunning to him. The research is mixed in terms of how valuable it is for a City to incentivize grocery stores but grocery stores generally are pretty good at maximizing their profit. From a business perspective, if they are not seeing any revenue then there is no reason for the store to remain open in the area, however, that does not mean that

there are opportunities for collaboration between the community and the stores. Marty explained there is federal funding available to help communities develop community-owned grocery stores and it's a model that the City is looking at. A high-end grocery store would probably not be addressing the issues in the way low-end stores could, but there is an opportunity to look at the cooperative model. Mr. Marty further added that research now is showing that ensuring not just the grocery store, but also the farmers markets, farm stands, corner stores, and small grocery stores all need to be part of the landscape to really create a food-secure community. A specific example is a small grocer, the stores with 3,000 sq. ft. or less, is probably the most cost-effective way for communities to address food accessibility issues. CM Garza emphasized the value of collaborating with UT to dedicate one person to help solve this issue because every district east of I35 shares the same concerns in regards to food accessibility.

Mayor Pro Tem Tovo appreciated seeing the information broken out by district, to share statistics that most Austinites do not know; including the fact that one out of every four children do not have secure accessibility to food.

- *CM Garza asked how staff gathered the data in the local chicken statistics.*

Mr. Marty described it to be one of the most interesting things that they worked on. Staff tried to find out how many people were gardening in their backyard as well, but could not come up with an easy metric. The Urban Poultry Association was able to tally up the people that sell chicken feed and divide that by how much an average chicken eats per day, and came up with the statistic.

Public Comments
None

Direction
The Committee directed staff to provide a briefing at an upcoming meeting in regards to what other cities have done to implement neighborhood food-buying coops, how they did it, and what the City of Austin can do moving forward to be able to incorporate neighborhood food-buying co-ops in the City.

Recommendation
No vote taken.